STATEMENT ON THE NATION'S REPORT CARD:
Vocabulary Results from the 2009 and 2011 NAEP Reading Assessments

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I have been involved with NAEP since 2003, when I was a member of the Framework Planning Committee, which was charged with developing recommendations for the current reading assessment framework. That development included creating a vocabulary assessment within the larger reading assessment. The motivation to develop a separable vocabulary assessment within NAEP sprang from the role that vocabulary knowledge plays in reading comprehension and questions about what we might learn about that role.

Vocabulary knowledge is critical to successful reading and academic achievement. A strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension has been in evidence for decades; people who score well on vocabulary tests also score well on reading comprehension tests. Research has revealed additional dimensions of the relationship between vocabulary and comprehension, including that the vocabulary knowledge of primary grade students can predict their high school reading comprehension, and that instruction in vocabulary can boost reading comprehension.

Research has also clearly shown that shallow knowledge of words, such as memorizing definitions, is unlikely to assist in reading comprehension. Encounters with a word in a variety of contexts are needed to build word knowledge that can be applied to comprehending text.

The NAEP vocabulary assessment is deliberately distinct from traditional vocabulary assessments in three ways:

- The NAEP assessment is not based on a list of specific words. This is because there is no set of specific words that students must know; rather there are types of words that are important to literacy. These are words that occur frequently in written text across content

areas, which are often referred to as "academic words" or "tier-two words." Building tests around a set of specific words encourages attempts to direct students to that limited set, focusing on developing shallow, rote knowledge.

- Target words on the NAEP assessment appear within the context of a passage rather than in isolation.

- The NAEP assessment items emphasize an understanding of a word's use within a context rather than the definition of the word. This decision represents the major rationale for the assessment; that is, NAEP assesses the kind of knowledge that students need to have about words in order to use the words to understand what they read. During reading, comprehension develops as readers integrate meanings of individual words into the context. Such integration requires flexible knowledge that enables a reader to adjust to nuances of word meaning across different contexts. Successfully integrating words within a context leads a reader to understand how individual words make a difference in the meaning of a context, for example, that "*deducing* rules from examples" has a particular meaning that is distinct from simply remembering rules or learning rules.

A view of vocabulary knowledge as knowledge applied to comprehension is also reflected in the Common Core State Standards, which in part say: "Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text … and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone."

The initial administrations of the NAEP vocabulary assessment indicate a consistent relationship between comprehension and vocabulary. The NAEP results provide a snapshot of how young readers deal with vocabulary in their reading: They are reasonably successful at developing an understanding of portions of a text based on knowledge of individual key words.

Further, the results suggest what readers with less-developed vocabulary may do when they meet an unfamiliar word. As the report examples show, these readers often select responses that conform to the gist of the overall passage. This is a good indication of students' comprehension, suggesting that these readers do strive to fit ideas together to make overall sense of the text. But it may also suggest a lack of precision of understanding that may result if words within a passage are unfamiliar. For example, for the item in the Mint Snowball passage about how "mint syrup *permeated* the shaved ice," the largest proportion of students who selected an incorrect response chose "made the shaved ice taste better." This is likely true, and consistent with the message of the passage, but it misses the precise idea that the flavor was created because the syrup spread throughout the ice.

Although we are in the early stages of assessing vocabulary in NAEP, these initial results may give us some clues on patterns and how vocabulary fits into reading comprehension. Scores for high-performing fourth and eighth graders at the 75th and 90th percentile in vocabulary were lower in 2011 compared to 2009, while in reading comprehension students in 2011 did as well as or better than 2009. This discrepancy may represent separation that can occur between vocabulary and comprehension scores. Comprehension is a multidimensional, complex process, and discrepancy between vocabulary and comprehension scores reminds us that a high score for comprehension of a passage does not necessarily mean that a student understood all parts of that

passage equally. Some key turning point or relationship may not be understood, possibly because of a specific word within that portion of text.

Future NAEP reports in this area will provide invaluable data and trends on vocabulary *in text* that can provide a better grasp of the nature of comprehending text and the role vocabulary knowledge plays in the quality of comprehension. Just as vocabulary is key to reading comprehension, NAEP will be key to showing us how the nation's students truly understand the words they will encounter and have to use every day.